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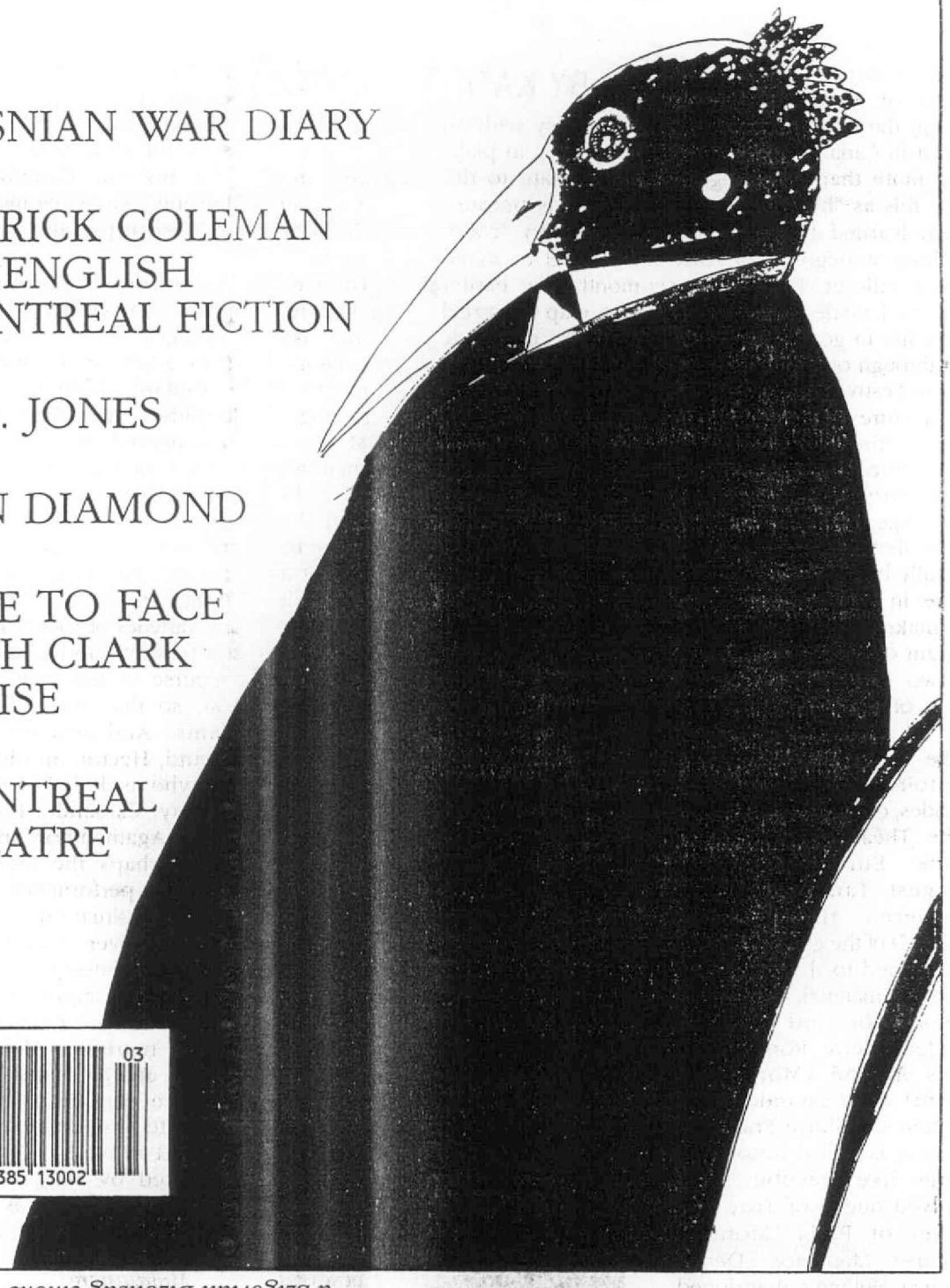

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FROM EURIPIDES TO CARBONE 14

NOTES ON MONTREAL THEATRE, 1993

BY KATALIN KÜRTÖSI

What follows is a summary of half a year of Montreal theatre seen through the eyes of a visitor from Hungary with an interest in Canadian theatre—and especially in plays using more than one language. If I hesitate to describe this as "bilingualism" in drama, it is because I soon learned that it is wiser to refer to "code-switching strategies"—at least if I wanted to avoid political fall-out. During my six-month stay earlier this year, I made a point of trying to map Montreal theatre life in general, ranging from shows of classic plays through opera and ballet to experimental theatres and the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques: a many-sided picture with several outstanding performances, some exciting experimental ideas, and some work needing further elaboration.

The European visitor is struck, first of all, by the wide range of theatrical activities in Montreal, from student shows to *The Phantom of the Opera*, but more forcefully by the fact that here one can witness theatre in the making: the lack of a long past makes it all the more exciting. The program over these six months spanned the two thousand five hundred year history of Western theatre.

The earliest piece of the classical repertoire was *Les Troyennes* by Euripides, directed by Alice Ronfard at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. Euripides, the youngest (and often considered the most "modern") of the great Greek triad, turned to the legend of Troy for material, evoking Poseidon, the God of the Sea (Jean-Pierre Ronfard), Pallas Athéné (Monique Richard) and Cassandra the prophetess (Marie-France Lambert), as well as historical figures like Hécube, the widowed queen of Troy and mother of Paris (Monique Mercure), Menélaos (Denis Mercier), Hélène's abandoned husband. As the title suggests, the focus of attention is on the impact of the Trojan war on the women involved. This ancient war fought almost three thousand years ago because of the abduction of a woman is a perfect allegory for any war. Coming from a war-torn region of Europe, where women are victims many times over, I felt especially sensitive to this question.

The Greek classics have been a great challenge for theatre people in our century: the use of the chorus has discouraged some, while others (like T.S. Eliot) tried to adapt it to twentieth-century situations. Alice Ronfard chose to give a faithful rendering of Euripides' play. The chorus in the TNM production consisted of about half a dozen women with stylized movements, wearing black, red or white dresses to underline the given situation in the play. The choreography balances the static elements of the play as poetry and intense emotions fill the stage. Suffering caused to women never fails to arouse sympathy, and in this play there are many varieties of such suffering: Hécube has lost a husband and a beloved son and, in the course of the play, she loses her grandson, so that she will have no descendants. Andromache has lost her husband, Hector, and has to bury her son who is killed in the course of the play. Cassandra is taken as prisoner by Agamemnon and in her mad dance—perhaps the most outstanding scene in this performance—seems ready to accept this situation.

Hélène, however, is incapable of comprehending the consequences of her irresponsible decision and looks at the events and the sufferings of others from a distance. She represents the transition between the antique world—the world of the women characters—and the world of the late twentieth-century, the mobile and ruthless world of men, as underlined by King Menélaos' black leather costume. It is not only the mise-en-scène that spans several

Malasangre
de: Mauricio Celedon

PHOTOGRAPH: TEATRO DEL SILENCIO

thousand years: Marie Cardinal's new translation makes the text as contemporary as possible—at one point even too contemporary: the Chorus' curse on the "Maudit Grèques!" seemed to me a bit far-fetched. This, however, does not change my overall impression of the TNM's *Les Troyennes* as a good evocation of Euripides' spirit, and the full house on a Tuesday night showed there is a demand for such endeavours on the part of Montreal audiences.

The staging of any of Shakespeare's plays always raises special problems, and this is especially the case with the so-called "problem plays," like *Measure for Measure*, which is also frequently called a dark comedy and neglected in the theatres. For theoreticians, however, the play is of great interest, as it incorporates elements of the early comedies (disguised character, multiple marriages) and of the romances (fable-like plot, sins and mistakes forgiven). But of even greater interest is the play's questioning of values and its searching exploration of love, of a wronged woman, of abuse and, in the brothel scenes, institutionalized sex. In theatrical terms, the Duke of Vienna is not only the good ruler who wants to see how his people act in his absence, but a director moving his characters around like puppets. Seen in this way, the strange coincidences (age-old theatrical conventions, like the women changing places so that Isabella does not have to give up her vow of chastity) acquire new meaning.

Théâtre 1774 stirred up the waters of Québec theatre life with their previous show *L'Affaire Tartuffe*, a heterolingual play set in contemporary Montreal with a (Molière) play within the play in late eighteenth-century Québec. No wonder theatre-goers were looking forward to what Marianne Ackermann and Suzanne Lantagne would do with Shakespeare. In their pre-show interviews they promised an updated version, but how would it be realized? In my view, this promise was best kept in their treatment of questions relating to women and the church. Isabella is in love with God, and her great dilemma is whether to keep her virginity or save her brother Claudio's life. Julietta is expecting Claudio's baby, Marianna is Angelo's abandoned fiancée, while Mistress Overdone would most probably be called a sexual worker in today's Montreal. The church is omnipresent in the play as an institution defining and supervising moral rules, and it is not by chance that the Duke himself dresses up as a friar when observing the behaviour of Angelo.

Suzanne Lantagne's direction lays special emphasis on the theatrical devices in *Measure for Measure*, working out a special, non realistic way of movement especially for Pompey (France Rolland, who also played the role of Julietta); some actors played male and female roles alike (Claire Schapiro was Marianna as well as a Nun and Provost the jailer); and the Duke's disguise was also "transparent." There were no sets, just a few props such as a multipurpose bench and musical instruments played mainly by Mistress Overdone (Silvy Grenier) and, as for the costumes, colour was more important than elaborate design. The stage itself was the floor of the theatre room at Centre Strathearn, surrounded by a few rows of benches on three sides. Entries and exits, therefore, were made through the audience's domain, which underlined the proximity of the two spheres.

Théâtre 1774 has been dedicated to experimental theatre from its inception in 1989. With *Measure for Measure* they proved that they not only question old routines of the theatre (like the necessity of impeccable English in staging Shakespeare) but are also ready to provide answers. This question and answer process is what makes experimentation live on.

Centaur Theatre in its 25th season returned to one of director Maurice Podbrey's favourite plays: *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov, with the director himself in the title role and Jean-Louis Roux, the founder of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde playing Serebiakov, a retired professor visiting his relatives in the country. Like other plays by Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, too, presents a small world of lost hope, disappointment and helplessness. Far away from intellectual centres in late nineteenth century Russia, time is spent nourishing unrealizable dreams, as the example of Sonia (Karen Bernstein) shows with her unfulfilled love for Astrov, the doctor who tries to escape by drinking or daydreaming about reforming traditional agriculture and saving the environment from mechanization. At the beginning of the play, the young wife of Serebiakov, Yelena Andreyevna (Kari Matchette) seems different from her provincial relations, but she too wants to break free from her aged husband, the Professor. Her flying spirit is stressed in this production by the *Carmen* motif and vaudeville-like speeded up scenes in the sitting room with the open window letting in the wind that sweeps everything away. At the other end of the scale, *Uncle Vanya* represents the world of impossible dreams when Vanya hesitantly enters the room with red roses for Yelena Andreyevna only to find her in the arms of Astrov the doctor (played convincingly by Lubomir Mykytiuk). This tableau conveys all the tragic tension of a hopeless situation without a single word being uttered, and confirms that Podbrey is not only a theatre director of high reputation but an excellent actor as well.

He has found a perfect partner in Jean-Louis Roux who, in addition to creating a credible figure of the Professor out of touch with the real world, also adds something extra to the original play: not having enough time to rehearse the role in English, he himself translated some passages into French (the English translation is by American playwright Jean-Claude Van Itallie) and switched from English into French. Having two languages used by a highly educated person adds an extra dimension to our image of this character as well as reminding us of the fact that for the intelligentsia of late nineteenth-century Russia, French was the language of elevated conversation. Director Alexander Marin from Moscow seems to have concentrated on key scenes of the play, which he accentuates by nice changes of rhythm from still-life to accelerated action—

compensating us for aspects of the performance requiring further elaboration.

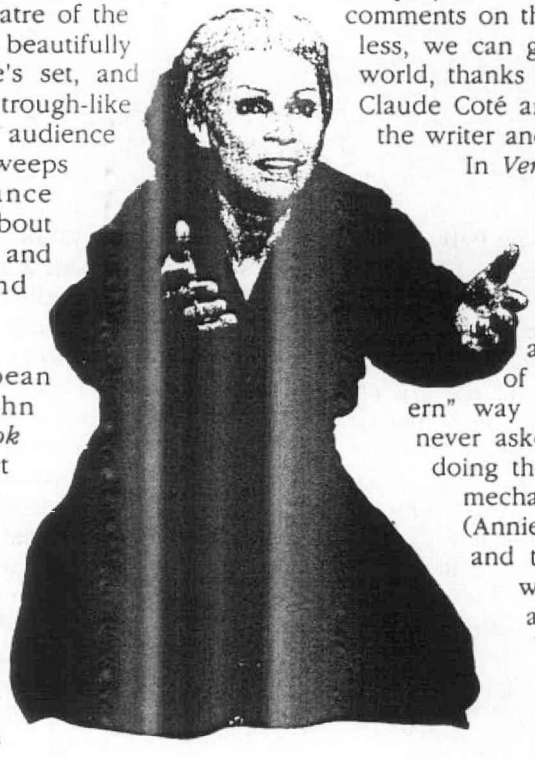
Albert Camus is a playwright who is more often referred to than played in the theatre world. This may be one of the reasons why director René Richard Cyr was tempted to present *Le Malentendu* in the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The play itself combines elements of Aristotelian tragedy (mother kills son without knowing who the victim really is) and of absurd theatre with great economy of language and movement. The result is a confined world filled with tension, pushing the audience towards sympathy for the murderers—mother and daughter—who are obsessed by their desire to get away from a remote small town and reach the sea and the sunshine during a war-torn period of European history. Their method is to rob and kill guests at the small hotel they own. To do so, the two women refuse to have any human contact with their guests, so that the young man returning from another country after some twenty years tries in vain to hint at his relationship with them. The mother is more hesitant, but the daughter insists on doing away with him. The young man represents a totally different world: he is happy with his wife who loves him, and he wants to return to his mother and sister after all those years spent way from home. The two women, however, strangle him instead of embracing him, and he—like all the other victims—ends up in the river.

The TNM production stages this ruthless and yet logical world perfectly: both the director and the actors and actresses (the mother played by Kim Yaroshevskaya, the daughter by Han Masson, the son by Robert Lalonde, his wife by Louise Laprade, while Jacques Galipeau was the servant) accept the restrictions required by Camus. This disciplined staging of *Le Malentendu* convinces us that this playwright is the predecessor of what Beckett developed in his "theatre of the absurd." Camus' bare world is beautifully suggested by Claude Goyette's set, and the water pouring down in a trough-like gully not only surprises the audience but also shows how death sweeps man away. The performance stimulates further thoughts about such basic questions as life and death and free will and determinism.

The contemporary European dramas presented were John Osborne's milestone play, *Look Back in Anger* and two one-act plays by Václav Hável. Osborne's play has been controversial ever since its first production in 1956 in London where it was considered very daring in its rejection of the older generation—while today we wonder what could have been thought so "revolutionary" about it. Was it the setting: a poverty-ridden attic room? Ibsen had that in *The Wild Duck*. Or, was it Jimmy's rejection of the "old world values," represented by his father-in-law, and consequently by Alison, his wife, too? Theatre history is full of plays exploiting similar conflict situations. What shocked theatre-goers must have been Osborne's language: colloquial not only in its vocabulary but also in its rhythm and stresses—and this at a time when the British stage echoed with the subtle lines of poetic drama (plays by T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, *et al*). The Centaur production—directed by Maurice Podbrey—was not really able to transfer the tension of the play into present-day Montreal. Very often the actors themselves (Aidan Devine, Stephanie Morgenstern, Glen Roy and Linda Smith) seemed to be at a loss with the situation they were in. The sets and costumes further underlined the lack of spirit in the production.

Théâtre Biscuit Le Théâtre de la Récidive showed *Audience* and *Vernissage*, two one-act plays by Václav Hável written in 1975, which show two aspects of the relationship between man and power in Central Europe. The present President of the Czech Republic has had first-hand experience of this world of paranoia, double-talk and vulnerability. In the brewery, the writer is no more than an "unskilled worker" who not only has to listen to his boss's nonsense but is also forced to down several pints of beer. In the course of the action it becomes more and more obvious that the boss is in an even more pitiful situation than his worker: he is a victim not only of his drinking habit, but of the system, too, and unlike the writer, he can see no way out. *Audience* shows minimal action: opening successive bottles of beer, the writer cheats by pouring it from his glass into that of the boss while he is out of his office relieving himself. The text of the play is almost a monologue, with some comments on the part of the listener. Nonetheless, we can get a full picture of this strange world, thanks to the expert direction by Jean-Claude Coté and Denys Lefevre in the role of the writer and Julien Poulin as the boss.

In *Vernissage*, the writer is visiting old friends, a couple who, unlike him, were ready to accept the position offered by the system. After listening to the list of their new acquisitions, he is offered a glimpse of their son and also of the couple's "new" and "modern" way of making love. The visitor is never asked a question about how he is doing these days, and the co-ordinated, mechanical movements of the couple (Annie Gagnon and Frédéric Teyssier) and the awkward uneasiness of the writer show how totally different are the worlds they are living in. Finally, the writer manages to



Monique Mercure in the role of Hécube in Les Troyennes

PHOTOGRAPH: LES PAPARAZZI

escape from this mad world suggested convincingly by the tiny stage that usually houses puppet theatre productions.

The Montreal season of the first part of 1993 featured not only landmark European plays, but some of Québec theatre history, too. Marcel Dubé's *Les Beaux Dimanches* (1968) deals with the disillusions and private frustrations of a generation unable to understand their children's totally different approach to key problems of life and politics. On the surface, the five couples in the play are successful middle-class people whose usual weekend fun consists of drinking parties at somebody's house and occasionally flirting with the wives of their friends. Their children are either puppet-like infantile creatures (like Rodolphe with his camera hanging around his neck) or they are not on speaking terms with the parents (like Dominique who seems to be ashamed of her parents' way of life).

Dubé's play raises questions that are still relevant today, but the TNM production handled the piece like a nineteenth-century tableau: the central element of the living-room set is the bar counter, which means that the actors can use only the side exits. In her introduction-scene, Dominique (unfortunately, the actress's name is missing from the stage bill) just came centre stage to speak her lines and then withdrew. Director Lorraine Pintal seems to have been hesitant with the little brushing-up the play itself needed, and the result is a monotonous rendering of an otherwise interesting piece.

Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs* (1968) needs no introduction to Canadian readers, and no doubt this play, the first to use *joual* on stage, has been the subject of many studies and is probably a temptation for any director in Québec. And especially for Denise Filiatrault, who participated in the first run of the play twenty-five years ago and loves it so much that she has read it time and again. A quarter of a century is a long time in contemporary history, and several things have changed during these years. Still, Filiatrault decided not to change the original text of Tremblay's play, but at the same time she has accented some scenes differently and has allowed the audience to re-evaluate certain situations and wonder what could have been thought so outrageous at the time of the original production. She has underlined the comic elements (especially in the case of the mother-in-law in the wheelchair) and has exploited the possibilities for song and music with a folkloric touch (the Bingo song) or with something like irony (*O, Canada*). This approach offered the actresses (Francine Ruel, Nicole Leblanc, Pauline Martin and the others) many opportunities to *play* in this celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Compagnie Jean Duceppe at Place des Arts.

While Tremblay can be considered a "classic" playwright of Québec theatre with a significant body of plays, Pan Bouyoucas, had his first French piece in Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui. *Le Cerf-volant* introduces the Greek community to Montréal theatre life, following the example of the Italo-Canadian community which has already achieved remarkable success and popularity thanks to the plays of Marco Micone, Filippo Salvatore and others. Pan Bouyoucas, like all ethnic writers, has had special problems to solve before he could begin to write—and among these problems the most important one was language. For a trilingual writer his base language is a conscious decision. Bouyoucas decided on French. Then he has had to work out a system of how to represent the different ethnic groups in the play—since it goes without saying that the plays of these writers generally deal with the life and conflicts of their community and with their relationship with other groups. *Le Cerf-volant* is about a middle-aged Greek couple (first generation immigrants to Montreal, played by Michelle Rossignol and Jacques Godin), Georges, their son (Emmanuel Bilodeau), a tenant in their house (a native of Montreal, Dominique Quesnel) and Andréa, a Greek restaurant owner (Lionel Villeneuve), who is also the husband's brother. Of the five-member cast, therefore, four have Greek as their mother tongue, while Céline, the tenant, is a Québécoise. In the play, however, nothing is said in Greek (except for one word, *aétos*, meaning a kite, i.e., the title of the play: Dimitri, the husband teaches it to the young woman)—instead, we find standard French, occasionally mixed with English, mainly by Georges and Andréa, his uncle, who wanted to show off in front of Céline; and at the end of the play, the Greek couple tries to communicate with her, too: their "French" is full of mistakes both in grammar and pronunciation.

The conflicts are manifold: those between the sexes (Stella, the wife, is fed up with her underdog situation; she has been sacrificing herself both to her husband and to her son, and she has not even had a chance to learn French), that between different generations (Georges represents a totally different way of life from his parents: work alone does not satisfy him), and finally that between different ethnic groups in a cosmopolitan city (Céline listens to her music loudly, while Dimitri wants to hear only bouzouki).

It is Georges, the young man, who is in a position to cross all the language barriers in the play: he is fluent in Greek, in French (including *joual*) and in English. He is ready to take advantage of his exceptional situation and acts as a messenger from his father to Céline, smoothing the conflict and making friends with the young woman. Later on in the play, however, he abuses his knowledge of languages: when his mother asks him to translate a French conversation into Greek, he gives her a false translation and does the same for Céline, too, so that she won't have a bad impression of his family. The language question, therefore, is at the centre of the play: not only can we see different levels of the same language—standard French, *joual*, French with mistakes—and several switches from one language into another (e.g. from French into English), but in the course of the play, languages are also very often an issue and a topic of conversation.

Pan Bouyoucas does not hesitate to call his

play a traditional one, in which emotions and action figure importantly. The central image is that of escape: all the characters want to get out of the situation they are in at present. The kite of the title clearly suggests this desire to fly away, but so too do the names of the women: Céline and Stella both refer to the sky. Up to now, however, the highest point they have been able to reach is the roof-terrace of their house—and this is where the whole play takes place.

Alongside the traditional theatrical activities, Montreal is increasingly becoming an important centre of North American experimental theatre-making. While the above plays represent verbal theatre, using traditional acting and directing, several experimental performances are based on these—equally important—elements: music, movement (very often acrobatic or with elements of dance), setting, props and costumes. Alternative or experimental theatre usually disregards the traditional borderlines between different art forms, thus offering an overall experience and inviting the audience's co-operation.

Terre promise/Terra promessa at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui was a joint production of the Montreal company "Les deux mondes" and one from Turin, Italy: "Teatro dell'Angelo." This collective creation shows the story of the earth and mankind in a wordless play with a very effective opening scene of a narrow slot, about two feet high on the stage: all we can see are human feet tramping on small sandhills and plants. This is when the central object of the play appears: a piece of flat stone which later on functions as mill-stone, tomb-stone, or a rock on which lovers carve their initials—always having a useful role until very recent history when it cannot fit into the smooth lawn of the golf course and is thrown away. In the last scene of the play, this very stone is found in water by archeologists for whom it proves to be an important "witness" of previous times: it is photographed and finally put in a glass case in a museum. The story of this piece of stone tells us the story of the human past and present: times of peaceful events as well as of wars. There are only a few props to suggest the period; the costumes are simple ones, just indicating the given activities; acting (Mark Bromilow, France Mercille, Monique Rioux and Yves Simard: each of them playing male and female roles alike) and music (Michel Robidoux), however, play major roles in guiding us along the history of this "promised land," our Earth.

Carbone 14, the best known Montreal-based experimental theatre company, has been the focus of critics' attention for over fifteen years with shows like *Le Rail*, the Emmy Award-winning *Le Dortoir/The Dormitory*, *L'Opium* and *Hamlet-Machine*. Last year's *Le Café des aveugles* (shown at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, for a few nights in June 1993) is a typical example of the work carried out by the company under Gilles Maheu's leadership: a collective creation, it uses music, dance and acrobatics, and exploits all the possibilities offered by theatre space. Language also transgresses its usual boundaries: the frame is *Susanne*, sung by Leonard Cohen, and the text of the play switches between French and English. One can hardly resist comparing *Le café des aveugles* with another play about blind people, Maeterlinck's *Les aveugles*. In contrast with the static meditation and the presence of death in the latter, the Carbone 14 play is full of movement, not only on the part of actors, but with the props (café tables and chairs) also moved about on stage at full speed, or, at other times, used by the actors like a trapeze.

Krieg, Carbone 14's latest creation, shown at Espace Libre, makes use of the company's usual techniques (strictly composed movement elements, full utilization of the space in all directions, including vertical, horizontal, and even "walking on the wall," with the help of a rope moved along a rail in the loft), but offers some novelties as well. First of all, instead of omitting a script, here the company turned to young German playwright Rainald Goetz's 1983 play, which is Part I of a trilogy. This raw material shows all the cruelty, misery and violence of our age: this is war. The performers—actors and musicians alike—aim at shocking the audience, mainly with sound-effects: the music sometimes resembles machine-gun fire, at other times it is alternative rock. Stefka Iordanova's songs—even if we cannot understand a word of their text—surprise us

with the beauty of the melody and with the strangeness of the sound and of the melody: back we are again in the Balkans where war is NOT a theatre experience.

It is not easy to pigeonhole a production using so many elements; still, expressionism seems to me the dominating style: one that leads us back to German art and theatre-making (Piscator, Brecht). It is underlined by the rhythmic, loud chanting of texts in German, English and French, meant mainly to shock again. Jerry Snell here—for the first time, Gilles Maheu does not play a central role in the conceptualization of a show, just observing his company from outside—exploits as many possibilities of the theatre as he can, including other arts like music, dance and fine arts in the composition of the scenes. All this, however, does not mean a change of direction in the work of Carbone 14 but rather a widening of the troupe's scope.

Canada's best-known individual performance artist is probably Robert Lepage, whose long-time aspiration has been to act as a bridge—not only between the two main cultures of Canada, French and English, but also between Canada and Europe. For these purposes he has been using a variety of means: shifts from one language to another, from one culture into another, from one age into another, between different art forms as well as directing European works in Canada (the latest example was *Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók's one-act opera, staged by Lepage in Toronto in Hungarian), and Canadian works in Europe. Lepage is without any doubt a truly experimental artist—but with his experimental work, he always reaches back to the past, to traditions, Canadian and European alike. In his *Plaques tectoniques* he combined the traditional Canadian preoccupation with geo-history and with the music of the rebellious Polish romantic composer, Chopin, and with one of the most popular sites of European art and culture, Venice. He earlier used the Italian motif in his *Vinci* of 1986.

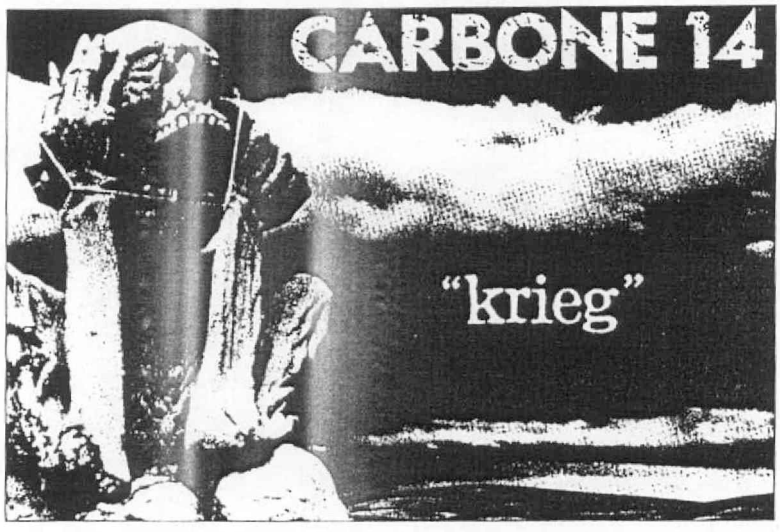
Les Aiguilles et l'opium, Lepage's one-man show (with music by Robert Caux) in Salle Denise Pelletier, uses episodes from the lives of two artists: a European—Jean Cocteau—and an American—Miles Davis—as its starting point. Both artists had contacts with the other continent, too: for the text, Lepage uses extracts from Cocteau's *Lettre aux Américains* and investigates Davis's stay in Paris. This starting point already suggests Lepage's approach to making a show: he wishes to incorporate different forms, and he disregards the boundaries of "art" and "natural sciences" as well. Throughout most of the 90 minute performance, he is dangling from ropes in front of a framed white screen which reminds us of Cocteau's mirror image in *Orphée*, but also provides Lepage with great possibilities for using it as a picture frame: Lepage acts in front of it and behind it, and he creates shadow-pictures (like those used in Artaud's admired Bali puppet theatre); at another point in the show his body is behind the screen, while his head is above it, as if he were in a swimming pool. The screen also serves as a projection screen which creates a poster-like effect or that of a constructivist painting (as when we can see parts of a trumpet scattered along it). For me, the two most remarkable scenes were those of Lepage falling from the top of a New York skyscraper (he dangles in front of the screen, and a video of the façade of a high-rise building is projected onto the screen), and the final scene when he literally gets inside the pictures. Since the screen is elastic, he is able to move from a two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional one, and later smashes it to pieces. Words cannot satisfactorily describe a show that contains such an abundance of visual and vocal elements challenging our traditional concepts of classification—which have the effect of separating theatrical shows, performance art, installation and video art.

Cocteau and Davis represent artists in general for Lepage: their feelings and fears, their frustrations and their attempts to reach out for contact with other people—for which he found raw-material in Cocteau's diary-like letters. On the stage he realizes this with the help of a telephone: alone in a room, talking to someone far away—this is a truly Cocteauian solution which he elaborated in his *La Voix humaine*.

The title of the Lepage show might lead us to think that there would be an extensive discussion about the use of drugs by artists of the highest reputation, or to provoke the audience to excuse or reject them. What we see in the show, instead, is a scientifically accurate application of a shot into an arm behind the screen, which distances members of the audience—among them busloads of high-school students—from this escape route. The standing ovation after the shows, the extended run of *Les Aiguilles et l'Opium*, and the crowded room for the informal talk with the artist after the matinée performance on February 18 signal that Robert Lepage is not only the "*enfant terrible*" but also one of the top favourites of Canadian theatre life.

Canada's official bilingualism, Bill 101, and Bill 178 are the subject of Jean Marc Dalpé's bilingual play *national CAPITALe nationale*. The final performance script of the play is by Vivenne Laxdal for the Théâtre de la Vieille 17, commissioned by the National Arts Centre with Robert Lepage as director and set designer. This sequence of thirty-five scenes shows an average day in the life of the Canadian capital, starting off with a toy train bringing in the commuters (though this phenomenon is much more typical of Toronto and Montreal) and the morning routine of a homeless man alongside that of a gay couple in a government office. It ends with the homeless man being beaten up as a frame suggests that another day has passed without anything having changed. This series of episodes shows that many civil servants are merciless in their aspirations (Victor—Robert Bellefeuille—wants to overthrow his own minister), corrupt and dishonest. All this, unfortunately, very seldom goes beyond the cliché level, and Lepage's technical solutions—especially the sliding panels that reveal only parts of the stage area and create a filmic effect—add clumsiness to an already overlong production.

Bilingualism is not only an issue in *national CAPITALe nationale*; it is also a means, as the text switches back and forth between English and French. This may be intended to create the impression that the use of the two official languages is an everyday experience in the Canadian government, but the theatre usually goes beyond such simple realism, using code-switching as a way of defining particular characters or indicating a social hierarchy. The pointless shifts between languages in this production, however, reinforce the impression that it lacks a basic central concept that would make it an integral whole.



La Licorne Restaurant Théâtre houses readings of plays and visiting shows by less-known experimental groups, and it was there that two small companies—Théâtre Il Va Sans dire and Le Théâtre de la Manufacture—presented *Cabaret Neiges Noires* conceived by Jean-François Caron, Dominic Champagne, Jean-Frédéric Messier and Pascale Rafie under the direction of Dominic Champagne. The title hints at Hubert Aquin's *Neige Noire*, classified as a novel by its author, but in dramatic form. The programme explains that here "*Quatre auteurs trempent leur plume dans l'encre acide de la vie et procèdent froidement à une impitoyable vivisection du rêve américain québécois*, and in several short episodes an ironical interpretation is made of some typically North American or Québec phenomena. Miles Davis and Harry Belafonte are caricatured along with some popular radio programmes in a show of lightning speed which stresses not only acting, but also music, lighting, and the colours of costumes, masks, and even make-up. Sensitive issues—like the image of Martin Luther King, the FLQ, "les Joyeux Troubadours," a love-making scene on front stage, and scenes between a mother in a wheelchair and her gay son—are not avoided. The audience is expected not only to watch and applaud, but also to identify the distorted scenes with their originals. While every member of the cast—André Barnard, Marc Béland, Julie Castonguay, Dominic Champagne, Norman Helms, Roger Larue, Susanne Lemoine, Wajdi Mouawad, Dominique Quesnel and Catharine Pinard—is expected to play, sing and dance as well as act, particular mention must be made of Catherine Pinard who was the motor of the performance: her energetic piano-playing provided the show's rhythm, and her songs containing lyric and jazz elements alike confirm her as a new star of Québec theatre.

As well as being the home of several experimental theatre groups, Montreal offers a unique opportunity to survey the wider theatre world. The Festival de Théâtre des Amériques has been drawing theatre lovers into the metropolis every other year over the past decade. It is always hard to make one's choice when there are so many exciting events running simultaneously: I decided to go and see less known companies, and thus missed Robert Wilson's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Light* as well as the Shakespeare cycle directed by Robert Lepage. What I did see, however, were two companies from Romania, Guillermo Verdecchia's one-man show from Toronto and Pol Pelletier's from Montréal, and the Chilean Teatro del Silencio with their *hommage à Rimbaud*.

Romanian theatre is hardly known even in neighbouring countries (of the former Eastern-bloc countries, it was unquestionably Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and occasionally Hungary where one could see remarkable shows) so it was all the more surprising to find two Romanian companies at the festival, one of which, moreover—the National Theatre of Craiova—opened the Festival with a production of *Titus Andronicus*. This early play by Shakespeare follows the tradition of Senecan tragedy, with much horror and bloodshed, in its exploration of the use and abuse of power, political intrigue, conspiracies and vengeance. While remaining faithful to the original, director Silviu Purcarete does not fail to seize the opportunity to refer to contemporary politics both in general and in Romania itself. The show opens with two different politicians speaking on two different television sets before elaborating on the complicated power-struggles of ancient Rome complete with political murders, disownings, tortures, mythic and real rape: a popular plot for late sixteenth-century audiences while those with a sensitive nervous system today can hardly bear the sight of Lavinia (Ozana Oancea) with her tongue cut out and her hands cut off, still warning her father, Titus (Stefan Iordache) about her attackers. There is irony along with the horror, however, especially in scenes with Demetrius (Valer Dellakeza) and Chiron (Vladimir Juravle).

The sets, costumes and props helped the audience follow the events of the play—which was performed in Romanian—and the re-arrangement of white sheets facilitated the frequent changes of scenes. The simple, tunic-like costumes suggest that in this world of cruelty rulers and soldiers are alike, while a scene in what looked like a contemporary military hospital, reminds us that the nature of war has not changed that much in two thousand years.

While the National Theatre of Craiova used Shakespeare to comment on current events, the co-production of Théâtre Franco-Roumain/Uniter (Union Théâtrale des Artistes Roumains)/ (Association Française d'Action Artistique/Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe) turned to a twentieth-century classic, as *Six Personnages en quête de...* uses Pirandello's play of a similar title as its starting point. As in the Italian play, here too, some actors/characters enter the theatre asking the director to let them present their story. They are preoccupied with ideas of social development, class struggle, and revolution, and try to incorporate them into a theatrical performance on the bare stage, quoting Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Paul Claudel and Gustave Flaubert (the play was performed in French).

The question of revolution, when raised by artists from Romania, inevitably leads to the subject of their 1989 revolution, and this is where the show gets really exciting: for how can a young company struggle with a question still lacking historical perspective? The refrain becomes "Speak about revolution, this is our specialty," which re-enacts the writhing of the late Conducator and his wife after the firing-squad shot them, as Romania's national colours and its flag with the hole in the middle become props. In the course of the elevated talk, however, a toy trumpet is blown every time the term "revolution" comes up and, later on, all we are left with is the short trumpet-sound, replacing the word. In the end, the actors manage to convince the director that she has to help them stage their story, and she begins to work with them, even to correct their pronunciation—but that will be another show.

The surprise in these two shows is not only such accomplished performances by relatively unknown companies, but also the daring involved in presenting their material to an audience unfamiliar with all of the background to their productions. While their basic materials were very different, the fact that each had the courage to look critically at their recent history suggests maturity and promises the self-assurance needed for further work and experimentation.

In *Fronteras americanas*, Guillermo Verdecchia's one-man show (Tarragon Theatre, Toronto), we are taken to a completely different world. On the occasion of the recent anniversary of Columbus's journey to the New World, Verdecchia introduces us to this continent through the eyes of a "hyphenated Canadian" who views North American life and culture as critically as the Latino world, without harming any parties. To achieve his purpose, he turns to cliché images of both North and South America, and gives us details of his personal history (born in Argentina, arriving in Canada as a school boy whose name was hard to spell in an English school, visiting his home and trying to avoid military service there) as well as the key dates in the history of the Americas.

His is a theatre about theatre: not only are we eye-witnesses to his preparation for audition in front of a video-camera—and the pictures projected on the screen backstage—but there are frequent references to the show's critics, who can get in free to the show, and to the audience, too, who will be a group with a common experience by the end of the show. Abundant material for theatre semioticians!

The other focus of attention is the question of language, as you might expect from a multilingual person who deals with the clashes and co-existence of different cultures. The base language of *Fronteras americanas* is English—in spite of the title in Spanish—but Verdecchia very often turns to his mother tongue, either to clarify what he wants to say, or to quote, or to pun or poke fun at clichéd images of the Latino character. In the course of the play, three languages are used, and several varieties of each of them. Standard English dominates with short passages in a broken or accented English; there is Spanish and mock-Spanish; and French too is used: the French both of Paris and of Montreal. These switches from one language to another underline Verdecchia's self-definition: "I am a hyphenated person but not falling apart" or, as he put it at another point in the show: "I am on the border." On the border, it is only natural to be exposed to different cultures and languages, and the true reflection of such a situation can be found in a play referring to these cultures and using several languages. Guillermo Verdecchia's play clearly indicates that one more ethnic group—that of the Hispanic world—is ready to enter Canadian theatre life, further diversifying heterolingual theatre activities.

Pol Pelletier's *Joie* could be called an exciting counterpoint to Verdecchia's show. This is a one-woman performance, in French, and instead of pointing at a new phenomenon, *Joie* provides a summary of the past two decades of Québec theatre history. A special treat for a visitor whose very first theatre experience in Canada was *Night Cows* (in English) by the same actress some ten years ago!

Pol Pelletier's is a highly verbal theatre, very often reaching poetic heights, consciously following the inheritance of Quebec theatre history—and contrasting it with the traditional French one, marked by the rigidities of Comédie Française-style acting that she mocks in the course of the show. Within Québec theatre, the emphasis is on the contributions of women writers (Jovette Marchessault, Nicole Brossard, Louise Laprade and others): the actress, dressed as a clown and using the minimum of props (a big yellow pillow to embrace or sit on, a toy trumpet and the cow-head mask of *Les Vaches de Nuit*) enacts passages from their plays, proving that there is much more to theatre history than losing oneself among old reviews in the archives. The transitions between passages are marked by narrating personal experiences or by singing a tango song in Spanish or jazz in English. The title—*Joie*—truly expresses Pelletier's relationship with the theatre: acting and creating a show are clearly sources of joy

for her. The result is not only a highly successful performance—given a standing ovation by the audience at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui—and a re-enactment of some crucial events of Québec theatre, but also a valuable new contribution by an artist who has spent several decades working in that theatre.

While Pelletier works with words, Mauricio Celedon, founder and leader of Chilean Teatro de Silencio, works without words. His training includes years studying mime techniques with Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau, and then several years playing in Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil. At the beginning, it seemed an impossible undertaking to evoke the spirit of a poet, a great master of modern French language, in a show that does not use words at all. Still *Malasangre*, a play based on the life of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, offers a complex view of the various stages of the poet's life, beginning with his school years in Charleville, through his period in Africa, his relationship with his mother and with fellow poet Paul Verlaine, to the turbulent events of the Paris Commune.

The sixteen-member cast—a different person in the role of the poet in every one of the four main parts—are masters of dance, movement theatre, mime and acting, supported by an orchestra playing African and South American music that lends a strong rhythm to the performance. Stylized movement, colours, make-up are equally important components of this sweeping show: at times we were offered a spectacle of an African tableau with the King of Abyssinia on a sedan-chair; another scene showed only the disobedient young boy facing his mother in traditional black dress; then finally the mayor unveiled his marble bust. Then we change to scenes of fast, sidling dance-movements to the beat of the music, sometimes with human voices (but no words at all), all with breathtaking speed and economy.

The open-air performance on the grass of Parc Lafontaine in front of an improvised row of benches as auditorium allowed for a really close relationship between actors and audience as well as highly stylized art and nature. This is total theatre, able to reach out to audiences of different backgrounds, and a clear indication for theatre-lovers that we have to widen our scope and include still new regions in our focus of attention.

Europeans, unfortunately, are very ignorant about theatre activities in Canada (and indeed some Canadians are hardly less so), but I hope this survey will suggest that they should be taking an interest in what is going on here. Last season's Montreal shows included well-established companies as well as new ones ready to experiment and offer a new vision of art and life, crossing cultural and language borders, happy to receive and listen to new voices from other parts of the world. Together with the theatre staff, the audiences also deserve acknowledgement for filling these theatres, encouraging and celebrating their artists, and thus becoming participants in a unique experience of live theatre. ❐